

Frozen in Time: Unfolding Experiences in Archival Process Data

(Developmental Paper)

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Introduction

This paper is a first step towards gaining a better understanding of how to methodologically work out the unfolding of experiences through using archival process data. In recent years, management and organization scholars have used archival data to identify temporal phases (Bingham and Kahl, 2013), reveal the unfolding of these temporal observations in the data (Jay, 2013), and compare them in terms of time series (Lok and De Rond, 2013). We focus on eight qualitative research papers using archival process data that appeared in the seminal *Special Research Forum on Process Studies of Change in Organization and Management* published in 2013 in the *Academy of Management Journal*. We fully acknowledge that this is a narrow focus on the already existing and much larger literature on archival process data, but we argue that it is a legitimate starting point to address some of the pertinent questions still prevailing in this stream of research. Furthermore, we look at the eight selected papers through the lens of a qualitative research project on strategists working for Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) and their archived experiences amid extraordinarily complex and uncertain contexts such as the Genocide of Rwandan Tutsi in 1994. In doing so, we discuss our methodological struggle of unearthing the temporal changing of experiences in archival data. That is, *how can we work out the processual unfolding of experiences in archival data?*

Background

Archival data may seem frozen in time and therefore may be perceived as stable, but we know that the archived data was once in flux and went through transformation (see Chia, 1995). In order to get to this flux and transformation, we could, for example, interview the people who had lived the experience. However, extraordinary cases like those we are interested in in this qualitative project are so unique that they are not always accessible at the time of the study or the extraordinary character of these times is only realized at a later stage. Therefore, access to these cases is often obtained by exploring documents archived in the form of commissioned reports. The people involved during the real-life scenarios may not be accessible anymore or, like it is always the case when interviewing people about their experiences, their stories, tend to become blurred “post-factum reconstructions and re-organizations of a much more complex, messy, embodied, and non-linear process” (Stierand et al., 2017: 1), because the time that has passed between our interviewing and the real-life event could often be years or decades. Thus, we should develop archival analysis methods that can tap into the transformational and fluid character of the data. Yet, for now, this represents the biggest methodological struggle for us.

Archival Data in Organizational Process Studies

One problem is that empirical research papers tend to report little about the analysis of archival data. More precisely, in qualitative research, archival data are often used as supplementary data sources and therefore tend to receive less methodological attention than, for example, interviews or field observations; the analysis of archival data, in particular, seems to be generally under-explained. Nevertheless, some qualitative empirical process studies, and arguably some of the most impactful ones, explain the use of archival data in an exemplary way

for the research community (e.g., Bingham and Kahl, 2013, Gehman et al., 2013, MacKay and Chia, 2013, Maguire and Hardy, 2013, Jay, 2013, Howard-Grenville et al., 2013, Lok and De Rond, 2013, Wright and Zammuto, 2013). These eight papers we are referring to were published in a *Special Issue* of the prestigious *Academy of Management Journal* in 2013 edited by Langley et al. (2013). From this selection, we can observe a wide variety of data collection and analysis approaches to archival data from the longitudinal archival study to the supplementary addition to the overall data set. Table 1 offers a condensed overview of these approaches.

Table 1: Collection and Analysis Methods of the Selected Papers using Archival Data

Paper Title	Authors	Data collection	Data analysis	Approach and Focus
The process of schema emergence: Assimilation, deconstruction, unitization and the plurality of analogies	Bingham C. B. & Kahl S. J.	Archival study of 399 articles, meetings/reports and books from 1945 through 1975 (including data before the time of interest to get a sense of pre-existing schema).	The analysis combines theory elaboration and theory generation. Took written discourse to represent the cognitive schemata. Process of identifying separately the various categories (nouns) and their relations (verbs) within each text. Used the software Automap for cognitive mapping. Achieved 4,330 unique categories and 451 unique relations. Checked this step with two external graduates who coded ten randomly selected projects (achieving trustworthiness of analysis). Three distinct temporally phased processes emerged.	Historical analysis. Focus on schemata (categories and their relations). Coding and cognitive mapping.
Values work: A process study of the emergence and performance of organizational values practices.	Gehman, J., Trevino, L. K., & Garud, R.	Longitudinal study of archival records (1,119 documents), ethnographic observations and stakeholder interviews.	1. Created a database of events (around 300). 2. Coded each event according to the stakeholders involved and to the type of event. 3. Constructed a visual map of the stakeholders and events involved. Identified about 60 critical events. 4. Constructed a chronology of events focused on the role of stakeholders and events from multiple levels [still doing fieldwork at the same time]. Iterative process in order to recognize patterns: chronology of events - ethnographic observations - interview themes - provisional insights. Creation of four different narrative accounts verified by different stakeholders and writing vignettes “antenarratives,” or “self-organizing building blocks of narratives in-the-making”.	Narrative and visual mapping strategies. Focus on events and patterns. Chronology, narrative accounts and vignettes.

Navigating paradox as a mechanism of change and innovation in hybrid organizations.	Jay J.	2-year ethnographic field study. Data set: participant observations, unstructured interviews, semi-structured interviews, and archival data	1. Tagging 2. Themming 3. Theorizing from more than 200 codes with conceptual network mapping 4. Developing a process model 5. Timing to validate and refine the model 6. Presenting the narrative	Iterative and abductive approach using narrative strategy. Focus on temporal phases. Coding and conceptual mapping.
Rekindling the flame: Processes of identity resurrection	Howard-Grenville, J., Metzger, M. L., & Meyer, A. D.	Data set: in-depth semi-structured interviews, brief structured interviews, naturalistic observations, and archival data (archived documents, journalistic accounts, personal memoirs, and audio and visual recordings) used as a supplementary source of data.	1. Created visual maps. 2. Compared emergent ideas with constructs in the literature. 3. Back to the archival data and field during this process. 4. Graphic and tabular displays to reduce data, over 100 codes from the analysis of the transcripts of the semi-structured interviews with the software Atlas.ti.	Grounded theory and visual mapping strategies. Focus on processes. Visual maps and coding.
On the Plasticity of Institutions: Containing and Restoring Practice Breakdowns at the Cambridge University Boat Club	Lok J. & de Rond M.	199-day ethnography. Data set: real-time observations, interviews, and archived documents (historical publications, proprietary archives) as a supplementary source of data.	Theory building: from 'thick descriptions' of the ethnographer from field notes, interview transcripts and observations to the more analytical. Iterative approach: data - literature - emerging structure of theoretical arguments and empirical categories. Look at responses to practice breakdowns (figure and table). Process history of each breakdown by combining narrative strategy and visual mapping. Then comparison of the five breakdowns to investigate common progressions of influencers. Two main process phases surfaced in four of the five temporal periods that were identified. Descriptive vignettes of the five breakdown episodes.	Qualitative and Inductive process applying narrative and visual mapping strategies. Focus on breakdown episodes (temporal observations). Process history, comparison, and vignettes.
Choice, Chance, and Unintended Consequences in Strategic Change: A Process Understanding of the Rise and Fall of NorthCo Automotive	MacKay R. B. & Chia R.	Five-year longitudinal in-depth inductive study. Data set: interviews, participant observation, and archival data as secondary sources.	1 st -order analysis: case history to provide 'thick description' of choices and processes. 2 nd -order analysis: identification of choice, change, unowned processes and unintended consequences.	Inductive single-case-study. Focus on processes. 1 st -2 nd order analysis.

Organizing Processes and the Construction of Risk: A Discursive Approach	Maguire S. & Hardy C.	Comparative longitudinal discourse analysis. Data set: archival data (publicly available documents found online).	1st stage of analysis: Creation of an event history database + a discursive event history database (texts ordered chronologically and classification of content). Building an overall timeline of the process. 2nd stage of analysis: identification of the texts that described the processes (inductive, interpretative, and systematical approach): coding the descriptions Identified eight different practices and checked them for patterns. Table showing this process. Then clustering the practices in tow bundles of four interrelated practices. 3rd stage of analysis: check the eight practices in the sets of texts (coding the texts for evidence of the practices and comparison). Table summarizing the analyzed documents. Another table explaining the coding of data and selecting of texts based on meaning.	Comparative discourse analysis. Focus on events and patterns. History databases, coding, and clustering.
Wielding the Willow: Processes of Institutional Change in English County Cricket	Wright A. L. & Zammuto R. F.	Longitudinal archival study. Access to private library and archives with the help of the archivist/historian of one club under investigation. Present a detailed account of all the archived documents used.	1. Construct a data set with summary notes and relevant quotes. 2. Hand coding of the text segments according to what?, where?, when?. 3. Validation of the understanding so far with observations and historians. 4. Classification in the two identified time periods with application of specific criteria (specific labels). 5. Creation of tables to show the findings. 6. Extraction of hundreds of statements to answer specific research questions.	Historical analysis. Focus on change processes. Coding.

What we can clearly see from Table 1 is that in the included qualitative empirical papers the methodological approach to archival data changes according to the specific research context and the research objective(s). That is, analyzing archival data needs to happen in the framework of the specific research objectives we are interested in. They need to be contrasted with the specific research context in order to gain a trustworthy understanding of the phenomena we are looking at. This is in line with the very logic of the hermeneutic circle where the understanding of the parts informs and needs to be contrasted with the understanding of the whole, which in turn changes the understanding of and needs to be contrasted again with the parts. What we can further see from this selection of papers, is that the analysis of archival data can be in part or in whole the building block of new theorizing in process research. Most of the papers we selected build on Langley's (1999) methodological strategies for theorizing from process data. Examples include papers that mix narrative with visual mapping strategies (Gehman et al., 2013, Lok and De Rond, 2013), or grounded theory with visual mapping strategies (Howard-Grenville et al., 2013).

From this admittedly very small selection of papers, we boldly deduce that at the heart of most of these analysis methods was some form of narrative approach (Jay, 2013, Gehman et al., 2013, Lok and De Rond, 2013). This is not surprising since narratives have “the great advantage of reproducing in all their subtlety the ambiguity that exists in the situations observed” (Langley, 1999: 695). We also realized that archival data could be used to triangulate observations, towards arriving at a more systematic interpretation that can lead to more trustworthy findings (Jay, 2013, Howard-Grenville et al., 2013, Wright and Zammuto, 2013). Further, studies that exclusively use archival data can obtain additional layers of validation. For example, Wright & Zammuto (2013) consulted the historian/archivist who gave them access to the archives, and Bingham & Kahl (2013) drew from historians’ insights in their analysis.

One way of unfreezing archival data is to gain additional contextual understanding by becoming ‘engaged organizational historians’ through ethnographic observations as described by Jay (2013). A second way (and the one that fascinates us most but also poses the greatest difficulty) is to unfreeze the data without additional data collection, i.e. by only using archival data.

Unfreezing Time

Let us discuss this aspect of unfreezing archival data in order to tap into the temporal processual nature of the actual experiences before they occurred. Time is central in any process study, i.e. process researchers are not interested in looking at a glimpse of a phenomenon, but try to understand “how and why things emerge, develop, grow, or terminate over time” (Langley et al., 2013). That is, on the one hand, we need to reactivate the passing of time in order to make the process emerge in front of us. At the same time, we need to deal with its history. Indeed, its existence in the past provides the context we need to understand in order to trustworthily interpret the process. Pettigrew (1997) called this the catching of “reality in flight”. In crisis situations, this catching is even more crucial since “people enact the environments which constrain them” (Weick, 1988). Therefore, the centrality of time in our archival process study makes it a form of historical research (Gill et al., 2018). Building a story from this historical research entails more than presenting a chronology of events (Langley et al., 2013, Pentland, 1999). Indeed, as process researchers we are primarily interested in uncovering and understanding the “becoming” of the process that explains the phenomenon we are interested in, i.e. answering the what, how, and why of its changes over time. Embracing the historical character of this type of research is still neglected in organizational research (Gill et al., 2018). Therefore, the theoretical framing for developing a methodological approach will require a substantial dose of researcher creativity that can also include proposing criteria, principles and techniques like those suggested by Gill et al. (2018).

This means that we need to reconstruct the stories of the processes and the stories of the stories, in order to account for the becoming of the processes while we keep changing the socio-historical context for each process (i.e. locating it in the time when it unfolded). This requires handling several, in our particular case potentially numerous timelines, socio-historical contexts, temporary structures and the processes along which these contexts are changing. Therefore we believe that we will need to engage with at least three orders of processes, many of them distant to us and potentially incomprehensible due to cultural misalignments. If we can

find active participants of these processes in their own times, we can gain at least post-rationalized personal accounts, not in order to triangulate the facts but to contextualize the stories. If this is not possible, we need to rely on the archival data, in which case a great deal will depend on the quality of the writing of the archival documents.

Conclusion and next steps

In this developmental paper, we have shared some methodological struggles we are facing when attempting to access the unfolding of experiences that are frozen in time and captured in archival data. We acknowledge the dilemma of analyzing processes with archival data, which are static by definition and will remain *frozen* in a sense. In our particular case the stories that we are looking at unfolded in the field and involved people working for MSF in various countries. We have identified an archival source of these stories and gained access. What we are interested in is not only these stories in and of themselves, but also how the field-stories influence what happens in boardrooms and, in turn, how the stories that unfold in boardrooms affect the work in the field.

The next steps for us will be to attempt to gain access to the person(s) who wrote these commissioned archival reports. We consider ourselves lucky, as the writing of the stories from the field is passionate, engaged, and involved. This means that a great deal of contextual information is embedded in the stories but also indicates that we need to pay particular attention to the trustworthiness of the source. Importantly, due to the incredible richness of the archival data and the exceptional difficulty of gaining access to doctors who could provide personal accounts of their lived experiences in the field in extraordinary times, we decided that for this particular research project the archival data will serve as a primary data source. In addition, we will attempt to supplement our research with interviews and extensive reading, but this will form a smaller part of the research. What makes this decision particularly sensitive is that the first author of this paper is a doctoral student, the other two authors are her supervisors, so the stakes involved in having the approach accepted are particularly high. However, we believe that unfreezing time through the analysis of archival data can be achieved and future doctoral students may have an easier time adopting a similar methodological stance. Therefore we are looking forward to having a productive discussion of the methodological approach and the challenges that we have outlined.

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